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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses adult students in community colleges, focusing on their learning expectations and needs. In 1997, nearly a third of community college students were age 30 or older. Adult students often have realistic, practical goals for their education and bring valuable life experience to the community college classroom. However, adults attending community colleges for the first time are sometimes inadequately prepared both academically and psychologically for what college-level learning will entail. According to one of the most widely known models of instruction for adult learners, Knowles' (1984) Model of Andragogy, five factors are significant in helping adults learn: (1) movement from dependent to independent, self-directed learning; (2) a growing reservoir of experience as a resource for learning; (3) a readiness to learn related to social roles; (4) immediacy of application replacing future application; and (5) internal rather than external motivation. This article also discusses Beane's (1997) conditioned learning styles--avoidance, dependent, and competitive--as barriers to traditional methods of teaching. Also in relation to instruction, Lawler's (1991) nine principles of facilitating learner-centered education are presented, including: (1) creating a physical and social climate of respect; (2) encouraging collaborative modes of learning; and (3) generating a participative learning environment. Contains 11 references. (JA)

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Digest

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Facilitating Responsibility for Learning in Adult Community College Students

By Cynthia Lake Howell

Community colleges enroll over 2.5 million adult students, defined as those age 25 and older. In 1997, nearly a third of community college students were age 30 or older; 46 percent were age 25 or older (Phillippe, 2000). Attracting the enrollment of adult students, however, is only the first step in helping them achieve their educational goals. Adult students, particularly if they are the first in their families to pursue postsecondary education, are often unfamiliar with how to succeed in the community college (Valadez, 1993). This digest will review adult students' learning expectations and needs, followed by recommendations for community colleges to facilitate responsibility for learning in adult students.

Expectations of Adult Students

Adult students come to community colleges with a variant set of characteristics. They are more likely to attend part-time, to take courses for self-improvement initially rather than for degree completion, and to enroll intermittently. They often work full-time and support dependents, frequently as single parents (Horn & Carroll, 1996). They are likely to take longer to complete their programs, but because they take their education seriously, they generally earn better grades than younger students do (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Adults bring realistic, practical goals for their education and valuable life experience to the community college classroom (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1984; Lawler, 1991).

However, adult students attending community colleges for the first time are sometimes inadequately prepared, both academically and psychologically, for what will be expected for college-level learning. In particular, first-generation students may have given little thought to postsecondary education while still in high school—or may never have completed high school at all—and therefore lack realistic expectations (Valadez, 1993). They tend to feel what Brookfield (1999) labels impostership, a sense that they have neither the ability nor even the right to become college students. They are likely to hold stereotypical impressions of college teachers, envisioning them as the all-knowing experts who pour wisdom into the heads of their students. When adult students taking classes for the first time hear instead that they must think for themselves, that there are no clear right or wrong answers, and that the purpose of a college education is to ask the right questions rather than find the right answers, they may feel confused, frustrated, and perhaps even cheated (Brookfield, 1999).

To elicit interest that leads to involvement, which in turn encourages responsibility, the curriculum must take into account what questions are most intriguing and significant to students. Course content must also bring about a sufficient grasp of concepts, principles, or skills that adult students can apply to new problems and situations (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Learning to Learn

Adult students enroll in community colleges with already established lives, bringing far more experience and practical information than younger students. They are interested in knowing how new knowledge relates to what they already know so that they can create a framework within which they can make sense of the new information (Brookfield, 1986; Knox, 1977). Adult students benefit from being able to associate new learning with their previous experiences and accomplishments, what Brookfield (1986) terms a "connectedn[illegible] learning. Thus, effective appro[illegible] to helping adults learn include contributions from the students and their involvement in what is being taught and how it is being taught. In keeping with the mission of community colleges to encourage life-long learning, one goal of the faculty should be to lead students to becoming self-directed learners, and to do so means encouraging and supporting adult students' involvement in their own learning.

Adult students, as products of an educational system that has traditionally placed responsibility for the learning process on the instructor, are initially likely to expect to be passive recipients of knowledge. Moving from a dependent student role towards a role as an independent and engaged learner is the adult student's first step to taking responsibility for his or her education. Much has been written on how institutions should change to meet the needs of adult students, but a more realistic approach to helping adults reach their educational goals is to provide them with the knowledge and skills they will need to meet the challenges of the community college. Thus, the emphasis in the classroom should be on not only what they learn but also how they learn.

The most widely known model of instruction for adult learners is Knowles' (1984) model of andragogy. Compared to the traditional instructor-centered pedagogy, andragogy assumes five factors related to helping adults learn:

1) movement from dependent to independent, self-directed learning
2) a growing reservoir of experience as a resource for learning
3) a readiness to learn related to social roles

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4) immediacy of application replacing future application
5) internal rather than external motivation

Knowles (1984) further suggests establishing a classroom climate that helps adult students to feel accepted, respected, and supported so that "a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint enquirers" can take place.

Unintended Consequences of Traditional Approaches to Teaching

The traditional pedagogical approach to teaching, that of the familiar teacher-as-dispenser-of-knowledge, places responsibility for the learning process primarily on the teacher. The students' resulting passivity and disinterest can discourage inquiry and involvement in learning; teachers can become frustrated at their students' lack of motivation and effort and their expectations of being spoonfed information. Unintended consequences of the teacher-centered classroom include what Beane (1997) identifies as three conditioned learning styles:

1) the avoidance style, characterized by the student's lack of participation and perhaps irregular attendance;
2) the dependent style, characterized by the student seeking security by doing whatever he or she is told; and
3) .the competitive style, characterized by the student focusing entirely on the end product of grades and viewing other students as competitors.

In spite of such consequences, community college educators often continue to rely on a pedagogical rather than an andragogical approach to teaching, perhaps because we teach as we were taught.

Reconsidering the Instructor's Role

The traditional paradigm for postsecondary education mistakes a means for an end, making providing instruction the primary purpose of college. A shift from providing instruction to producing learning frees the instructor from the role of being the exclusive source of knowledge for students to becoming a facilitator of their learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Community college teachers can seek the participation of students in determining approaches to learning and might even invite them to help identify the goals and objectives of the course. Knox (1977) points out that "active interest and participation are more likely when the learner helps identify objectives, selects learning tasks, and understands procedures" (p. 411).) In addition, learner-centered classes in the community college have been found to be related to higher grades, a greater sense of accomplishment, and greater overall satisfaction among students (Miglietti and Strange, 1998).

Lawler (1991) lists nine principles through which instructors can facilitate learner-centered education:

1) create a physical and social climate of respect;
2) encourage collaborative modes of learning;
3) include and build on the student's experiences in the learning process;
4) foster critically reflective thinking;
5) include learning which involves examination of issues and concerns, transforms content into problem situations, and necessitates analysis and development of solutions;
6) value learning for action;
7) generate a participative environment;
8) empower the student through learning; and
9) encourage self-directed learning.

To capitalize on the learning strengths of adult students, community college courses can emphasize learning through synthesis, interpretation, and application of knowledge rather than the traditional acquisition of large amounts of new information. An awareness of the learning abilities and expectations of adult learners will help instructors to facilitate students' involvement in and responsibility for their learning.

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